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Atari Online News, Etc.
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Dana P. Jacobson, Publisher/Managing Editor
Joseph Mirando, Managing Editor
Rob Mahlert, Associate Editor

Atari Online News, Etc. Staff

Dana P. Jacobson -- Editor
Joe Mirando -- "People Are Talking"
Michael Burkley -- "Unabashed Atariophile"
Albert Dayes -- "CC: Classic Chips"
Rob Mahlert -- Web site
Thomas J. Andrews -- "Keeper of the Flame"

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-* Yahoo Does PR With Its Shareholders *-
-* Mac Snow Leopard: New Weapon to Windows? *-

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->From the Editor's Keyboard
"~~~~~"

"Saying it like it is!"

Well, it's been a long week! Another typical New England weather pattern, with thunderstorms every day. This weather is driving one of my dogs crazy - she hates the sounds of thunder. In fact, she's cowering under my desk right now. In this instance, however, it's the sound of fireworks going off in the neighborhood that has her in panic mode.

It was a typical 4th of July celebration around here. A few parties going on at the moment, but we're staying in, enjoying a nice barbecue, and relaxing. I'm stuffed, and trying to recover. That's why this issue is a little late this week!

So, to get finished and off to you, I'll cut this short. Let's not forget the reason for this holiday celebration, as well as what it did to help us enjoy our way of life today. And, remember that we're still working to maintain that independence and freedom today. Despite its faults, we're still living in the best country in the world. Happy 4th!

Until next time...

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PEOPLE ARE TALKING
compiled by Joe Mirando
joe@atarinews.org

Hidi ho friends and neighbors. You won't get to read this until after the Fourth of July holiday, but I hope you had a happy and safe celebration.

If you're outside the U.S., then... well, nevermind. [grin]

Unfortunately, there aren't enough messages to put together a column this week. I counted the useful messages on one hand this week. We've come a long way since the heyday when there were hundreds upon hundreds of messages in the NewsGroup. Of course, there were many many more users back then, and everything was new.

->A-ONE's Game Console Industry News - The Latest Gaming News!
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Microsoft Corp plans to cut the price of its best-selling Xbox 360 Pro model by \$50, to \$299 in the next few weeks, the Hollywood Reporter reported citing anonymous sources.

Rumors of the Xbox price cut swirled on popular gaming blogs Joystiq and Kotaku last week. The two sites received snapshots of Kmart and Radio Shack flyers advertising the \$299 price.

A cut to \$299 would make the Xbox 360 Pro \$100 less than one of the console's major rivals, Sony Corp's PlayStation 3 with a 40 gigabyte hard drive.

'World of Warcraft' Sequel in the Works?

In an interview with German site OnlineWelten during the Blizzard Worldwide Invitational, Pardo discussed Blizzard's continued success as a developer as well as the measured steps it has taken toward building its development teams. When he was asked about a recent job posting on Blizzard's site for a next generation MMO, Pardo smiled and said, "Yes, there is one more unknown project still in development."

"We ship the games when they're ready," Pardo said. "And while it would

be great to go on a piece of paper saying one game this year, one game next year, I would love if that happened. But we're going to make the right decision for the game."

Looks like WoW fans will have to content themselves with epic raids on the Icecrown glacier in the upcoming Wrath of the Lich King expansion pack. And, of course, there's always StarCraft 2....

Predators Use Gaming Consoles To 'Get Foot in the Door'

Sexual predators are using gaming consoles such as the Wii, PlayStation and Xbox to meet children online.

"Child predators are migrating from traditional methods to alternate media," says Detective Lt. Thomas Kish of the Michigan State Police. "They are going to places where children are."

Predators view games that allow kids to access the Internet and text message other players as a "foot in the door," he says.

Parents may not realize that gaming consoles have become Internet devices or that savvy kids can bypass parental controls, says Marc Rogers, director of Purdue University's Cyber Forensics Lab.

Police who have been doing stings in Internet chat rooms for years now are going undercover to catch predators playing interactive games, ranging from Grand Theft Auto to old-fashioned chess and checkers. They're making arrests.

In Utah, a man was charged this year with sexual exploitation of a minor for enticing a 12-year-old boy he met through an online game into having sex, says Lt. Jessica Farnsworth, field commander of the Utah Internet Crimes Against Children Task Force. She says predators meet kids on a game, "groom them and then try to move off the game."

In December, Michigan prosecutors convicted Adam Glenn Schroeder of criminal sexual conduct with a minor and using a computer to commit a crime. He used a game, World of Warcraft, to lure a 12-year-old girl into having sex with him. He was sentenced to 10 years in prison.

Police had found Schroeder on other games. "This guy had been doing it for a while," Kish says.

In another case, Kish says, a 10-year-old boy playing the Halo Xbox game got a video message from a man that showed the adult engaged in a sex act.

Farnsworth says her office has seized many Xbox machines for investigation and has received training from the maker, Microsoft, on how to extract text messages and other information from them.

Microsoft trains police at national conferences, says Tim Cranton, associate general counsel for the company's Worldwide Internet Safety Enforcement program

Cranton says the Xbox has password-protected "family settings" that allow parents to turn off Internet access or track content and contacts.

PlayStation and Wii also have such controls.

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A-ONE's Headline News
The Latest in Computer Technology News
Compiled by: Dana P. Jacobson

Yahoo Takes Its Defense Against Icahn to Investors

Yahoo Inc. began pressing a case to major shareholders Monday that its board and management deserve a chance to prove they made the right move when they rejected a \$47.5 billion takeover offer from Microsoft Corp.

The missed opportunity to sell to Microsoft infuriated many Yahoo shareholders, prompting activist investor Carl Icahn to agitate for replacing Yahoo's nine directors and reviving negotiations with Microsoft. If he gains control of the board, Icahn intends to fire Yahoo co-founder Jerry Yang as chief executive.

In response, Yahoo has assembled a 32-page presentation for shareholders to elaborate on the points it has been emphasizing since Microsoft withdrew its bid May 3.

Investors will decide the dustup in a vote scheduled Aug. 1 at Yahoo's annual meeting. That leaves another month for the Sunnyvale, Calif.-based company and Icahn to disparage each other.

And with Yahoo shares sliding back toward \$19.18 - their value before Microsoft's bid - Yahoo's management is facing even more pressure to end the financial malaise that triggered the takeover bid in the first place. Yahoo shares fell 67 cents Monday to close at \$20.66.

Icahn didn't respond to a request for comment Monday, but he wrote on his blog last week that he would share his latest opinions on Yahoo "shortly."

Yahoo argues that entrusting the company's fate to Icahn would be foolhardy because his strategy centers on resurrecting a dead deal.

Its breaking point came after Yang and Microsoft CEO Steve Ballmer couldn't agree on a price. Ballmer had orally offered \$33 per share, but Yang wanted \$37 per share - a price that Yahoo's stock hasn't reached in nearly 2 1/2 years.

Since Microsoft walked away, Yahoo said it tried to reopen sales negotiations in meetings on May 17 and June 8, only to be told "unequivocally" that the software maker no longer is interested in buying Yahoo in its entirety.

Hoping to dispel any perception that it mishandled the Microsoft negotiations, Yahoo's shareholder presentation lists the dates of at least eight meetings that its management or other representatives held

with Microsoft before the bid was withdrawn.

Yahoo also wants to raise doubts about the sincerity of Microsoft's bid, arguing that its unsolicited suitor was "unresponsive and inconsistent" during the first three months of negotiations.

"The record casts doubt on whether Microsoft was ever committed to a whole company acquisition," Yahoo asserted in the shareholder presentation.

But Ballmer appeared to leave little doubt he prized Yahoo's whole franchise when he submitted his initial bid of \$44.6 billion, or \$31 per share. The Jan. 31 offer was 62 percent above Yahoo's stock price at the time. Microsoft made its oral offer of \$47.5 billion May 2.

"This is simply revisionist history," Microsoft spokesman Frank Shaw said Monday about Yahoo's account of events.

Yang may have a prime opportunity to share his side of the story next week when he is scheduled to be at the same exclusive media investment conference as Gordon Crawford and Bill Miller, the money managers for Yahoo's two biggest shareholders.

Both Crawford, of Capital Research Global Investors, and Miller, of Legg Mason Capital Management, have publicly criticized Yahoo's handling of the Microsoft negotiations.

Microsoft Chairman Bill Gates and Yahoo President Susan Decker also are on the guest list for the media conference, which is hosted annually in Sun Valley, Idaho, by investment bankers Allen & Co. and is renowned for hatching big business deals.

To move on from the Microsoft bid, Yahoo hopes for a major boost from a planned advertising partnership with Internet search leader Google Inc.

By relying on Google's superior technology to show some of the ads alongside its search results, Yahoo believes it can increase its annual revenue by about \$800 million and generate another \$250 million to \$450 million in annual cash flow.

Although the Google partnership still could be blocked by antitrust regulators, Yahoo believes it offers more value than an alternative deal proposed by Microsoft. The software maker offered \$9 billion for Yahoo's online search operations and a roughly 16 percent in stake in the rest of Yahoo's business.

In its shareholder presentation, Yahoo argues Microsoft's partial offer is a "bad choice" because it wouldn't be as lucrative or as flexible as the Google partnership.

Microsoft Seeks Allies for New Yahoo Move

Microsoft Corp is preparing a new bid for Yahoo Inc's search business and has approached other media companies about joining it in a deal that would effectively lead to Yahoo's breakup, the Wall Street Journal said.

By mid-day, CNBC refuted the report of a new approach. Citing unnamed

sources, CNBC said Microsoft has held "no new talks" and there are "no negotiations," sending Yahoo's shares up 7 percent. The gain was pared a bit in midday trade.

Quoting people familiar with the discussions, the Journal said talks with Time Warner Inc and News Corp, among others, were preliminary and unlikely to result in a deal with Yahoo.

The Journal said that two weeks ago, Microsoft Chief Executive Steve Ballmer called Yahoo Chairman Roy Bostock to suggest they meet to discuss a new idea involving other partners.

Microsoft subsequently canceled the meeting, which Yahoo took as a sign that Ballmer's efforts to find a partner have so far failed, the paper said.

Microsoft, Yahoo, Time Warner and News Corp were not immediately available for comment.

Yahoo rejected a \$47.5 billion takeover offer by Microsoft, and earlier this week questioned whether the software maker was ever serious about a full-scale merger. However, Yahoo remains open to discussing any proposal from Microsoft, the paper said.

In the meantime, Yahoo investor Carl Icahn is running a slate of directors to replace Yahoo's board and has called for the removal of Chief Executive Jerry Yang ahead of the company's annual shareholder meeting to be held in Silicon Valley on August 1.

The activist shareholder has said the company should still offer to sell itself, though Microsoft has said it is no longer interested in a full buyout.

Shortly after Microsoft walked away from talks to buy all of Yahoo, Yahoo had offered to sell itself to Microsoft for about \$33 a share, the Journal reported.

However, representatives for Microsoft have in recent days, met with Icahn to encourage him to press his proxy contest as a way to keep pressure on Yahoo to enter into a deal that would lift its share price, the paper said, citing people familiar with the matter.

Yahoo shares rose 5.99 percent to \$21.41 on Nasdaq. On Tuesday the stock closed at \$20.20, its lowest session-ending level since January 31, the day before Microsoft first made public its offer to buy Yahoo.

Microsoft shares fell 1.8 percent, or 49 cents to \$26.38. Microsoft shares closed Tuesday at \$26.87, their lowest closing level since March 2007. In a volatile session, the stock had dropped to as low as \$23.19, its lowest in nearly two years.

Mac OS X Snow Leopard: Apple's Secret Business Weapon?

Judging from initial accounts, the next version of the Mac OS X, named Snow Leopard, will be aimed squarely at business and enterprise users, signaling a formal push by Apple to take Windows head on outside the consumer and education markets. "Apple is taking the Mac OS one step

closer to the enterprise," says Michael Gartenberg, an analyst at Jupiter Research.

Apple declined to comment on its plans for the new Mac OS, other than to reiterate the sketchy details it released at the recent Worldwide Developers Conference. Snow Leopard - the numerical version is not yet set - is slated to ship in summer 2009, six months or so before Windows 7's scheduled debut.

Higher performance and Exchange support at the core Apple's plans for Snow Leopard mainly involve improving application performance, as well as bringing Microsoft Exchange Synchronization into the OS itself, so Apple's iCal, Address Book, and Mail will be Exchange-enabled out of the box.

The performance changes include making the Mac OS 64-bit and providing an architecture called Grand Central that lets developers take better advantage of multiple-core processors. Mac OS X Snow Leopard will also add support for the Open Computing Language (OpenCL), which will let application developers directly tap graphics processors in the Macs. Apple also promises faster processing of dynamic media via QuickTime X and a 50 percent improvement in JavaScript performance to speed Web apps.

"We're excited about Snow Leopard from a reliability and performance perspective," says Pat Lee, group manager for consumer products at EMC's VMware subsidiary. "For us, it will make running Windows [via VMware Fusion on a Mac] better than ever." He cites the 64-bit OS and use of OpenCL as two key boosts to Fusion's future performance.

The performance improvements, if delivered as promised, will appeal to Mac users of every stripe, but the Exchange support is evidence that Apple is targeting the enterprise. A high-performance Mac OS X with built-in Exchange support that continues to be hardware-compatible with standard PC equipment and support Windows through products such as Parallels Desktop and VMware Fusion should appeal strongly to business users, says analyst Gartenberg. "It could bring business users to the Mac," concurs VMware's Lee.

A more stable OS strategy should appeal to businesses Mac OS X Snow Leopard will not be a major shift in terms of user experience and functionality, says Tim Bajarin, an analyst at Creative Strategies. The name Snow Leopard itself suggests that the next Mac OS X won't be a radical departure from its predecessor, Leopard, he notes.

Bajarin likens the expected user experience in upgrading to Snow Leopard to that of installing a Windows service pack, which may offer significant improvements in the OS but doesn't change the user experience or break the application base. "If I'm Apple, I want to get new people in the fold, and I don't want to confuse them with a new OS every 18 months," he says. "Businesses don't want to see a new OS every 18 months because it's very disruptive," Gartenberg agrees.

Both analysts see a method to Apple's slowing down of major Mac OS X releases since the highly disruptive, nearly all-new Mac OS X 10.0 appeared in 2001. That year, Apple released 10.0 Cheetah in March and 10.1 Puma in August. The 10.2 Jaguar version followed in August 2002, and 10.3 Panther shipped in October 2003. Mac OS X 10.4 Tiger took a bit longer, arriving in April 2005, and the current Mac OS X 10.5 Leopard came out after an even longer interval, in October 2007. Snow Leopard is planned to arrive after a similar, roughly two-year interval.

Although Mac OS X has evolved dramatically since its 2001 debut, both Bjarin and Gartenberg note that Apple has very carefully smoothed the transition path from each version to the next, with minimal hiccoughs. "That smooth transition is especially important as the user base grows," Bjarin notes.

The disappointment over the disruptive transition from Windows XP to Windows Vista may make it even easier for businesses to consider adopting Mac OS X Snow Leopard. Already, researchers have noted an uptake in business adoption of the Mac OS. "When you push users off a platform rather than try to pull them in, the first thing they say is that they don't want to go to your destination," Gartenberg says. In that context, "a migration to Mac OS X might not be [more disruptive] than going to Vista or Windows 7," he notes.

Internet Addressing Agency Loses Its Own Addresses

This doesn't sound good: The nonprofit agency in charge of the Internet's addresses recently lost track of its own.

The Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers, or ICANN, said it happened when an Internet registration company it oversees got fooled into transferring the domain names to someone else.

The attack was quickly noticed, and ICANN's domain names were restored within 20 minutes. However, because many Internet directories retain information for a day or two, visitors could have been redirected to an unauthorized site for longer.

ICANN said Thursday that new, unspecified security measures should prevent such attacks in the future. The organization also said it was reviewing other security procedures.

The domain names hijacked were ICANN.com and IANA.com - for the ICANN subdivision known as the Internet Assigned Numbers Authority. Visitors to those addresses are normally redirected automatically to the organization's main sites at ICANN.org and IANA.org, neither of which was affected by the attack.

Google Bows to Pressure, Adds 'Privacy' Link to Home Page

For Google, ready Privacy: That could be the subliminal message Google wants to send by replacing its name on its famously spartan home page with a link to its privacy policy.

Last month, privacy organizations wrote to Google CEO Eric Schmidt asking the company to link to its privacy policy from its home page. Including the link on the home page is good practice - and also mandated by California law, the organizations said.

On Thursday, Google acceded to the request, putting the word "Privacy" at the foot of its home page and linking it to its privacy information

pages. The link replaces the company's name next to the copyright notice, leaving the number of words on the home page unchanged.

Google had previously declined to make the change to its home page, saying that users appreciate the lack of clutter there. Microsoft and Yahoo both include privacy links on their search pages, while Ask.com added a link to its privacy policy on June 18.

The order to remove the company's name to make way for the privacy link came right from the company's founders, Vice President of Search Products and User Experience Marissa Mayer explained in a posting to the company's blog.

"Larry and Sergey told me we could only add this to the homepage if we took a word away - keeping the 'weight' of the homepage unchanged at 28," she said.

That figure holds only if you have signed out of your Google account and are viewing the basic U.S. home page in English, see no promotional line running beneath the search box, see no invitation to make Google your home page because you have already done so, and count "2008 Google" (now "2008 Privacy") as two words.

Fiber Internet Growth Overtakes Cable

For the first time, more people around the world are signing up for fiber-optic broadband service than for cable Internet service, according to a British research firm.

Fiber providers added 4.2 million customers in the first quarter, while 2.5 million customers signed up for cable modems, according to a report released Wednesday by Point Topic.

The bulk of the new fiber subscribers are in China, where 2.5 million signed up, for a total of 16.7 million. The U.S. is in fourth place after Japan and Korea. Point Topic counted 303,000 new U.S. fiber customers, for a total of 2.6 million.

Fiber-optic Internet connections provide faster speeds, but the cost of the buildout is daunting. In deregulated telecommunications markets like those of the U.S. and Western Europe, carriers are unsure if fiber is worth the investment because they are competing there with cheaper technologies like cable and DSL, and it's unclear how much regulators will let them profit.

"It's difficult to persuade operators to make the sort of commitment needed when they can't guarantee their returns," said Oliver Johnson, chief executive of Point Topic. Without government funding, it will be a long time before fiber connections are widespread, he said.

Verizon Communications Inc. is the only major U.S. telecommunications company to pull fiber all the way to subscriber homes. Verizon accounts for slightly more than two-thirds of total U.S. fiber hookups. The rest of the fiber-to-the-home, or FTTH, deployments are by small phone companies and by municipalities.

Cable modems are far more common, at 79.6 million worldwide, according

to Point Topic, compared to 42.1 million fiber connections. More than half, or 40.1 million, of all cable subscribers are in the U.S., which has a comparatively extensive cable infrastructure.

Broadband over phone lines remains the most common means of Internet access. Globally, 238.1 million households had DSL, or Digital Subscriber Line, an increase of 9.3 million over the quarter, Point Topic said.

Study Says Many Dial-up Users Don't Want Broadband

A new study suggests that attitude rather than availability may be the key reason why more Americans don't have high-speed Internet access.

The findings from the Pew Internet and American Life Project challenge the argument that broadband providers need to more aggressively roll out supply to meet demand.

Only 14 percent of dial-up users say they're stuck with the older, slower connection technology because they can't get broadband in their neighborhoods, Pew reported Wednesday.

Thirty-five percent say they're still on dial-up because broadband prices are too high, while another 19 percent say nothing would persuade them to upgrade. The remainder have other reasons or do not know.

"That suggests that solving the supply problem where there are availability gaps is only going to go so far," said John Horrigan, the study's author. "It's going to have to be a process of getting people more engaged with information technology and demonstrating to people it's worth it for them to make the investment of time and money."

Nonetheless, the Pew study does support concerns that rural Americans have more trouble getting faster Internet connections, which bring greater opportunities to work from home or log into classes at distant universities. Twenty-four percent of rural dial-up users say they would get broadband if it becomes available, compared with 11 percent for suburbanites and 3 percent for city dwellers.

Vint Cerf, one of the Internet's key inventors and an advocate for the idea that the government should be more active in expanding broadband, suspects that many more dial-up users would be interested in going high-speed if they had a better idea of what they're missing. He pointed out that broadband access is available from only one provider in many areas, keeping prices high and speeds low.

"Some residential users may not see a need for higher speeds because they don't know about or don't have ability to use high speeds," Cerf said. "My enthusiasm for video conferencing improved dramatically when all family members had MacBook Pros with built-in video cameras, for example."

Overall, Pew found that 55 percent of American adults now have broadband access at home, up from 47 percent a year earlier and 42 percent in March 2007. By contrast, only 10 percent of Americans now have dial-up access.

Despite the increase in overall broadband adoption, though, growth has been flat among blacks and poorer Americans.

Of the Americans with no Internet access at all, about a third say they have no interest in logging on, even at dial-up speeds. Nearly 20 percent of nonusers had access in the past but dropped it. Older and lower-income Americans are most likely to be offline.

Pew's telephone study of 2,251 U.S. adults, including 1,553 Internet users, was conducted April 8 to May 11 and has a margin of sampling error of plus or minus 2 percentage points. The error margins for subgroups are higher - plus or minus 7 percentage points for the dial-up sample.

Forty Percent of Web Browsers Open to Hackers

Researchers from Google, IBM and the Communications Systems Group in Switzerland released a study Monday that shows only 60 percent of Web users are surfing with patched, updated browsers.

They estimated that only 576 million of 1.4 billion Internet users worldwide used the most secure browsers. The data came from Google's server logs between January 2007 and last month.

Mozilla users are most likely to be using the latest versions of their browsers, with 83 percent of Firefox users patched. By contrast, only 63.3 percent of Safari users and 56.1 percent of Opera users have the latest versions. Microsoft Internet Explorer users ranked at the bottom with only 47.6 percent using the most secure version of IE7.

"We believe the auto-update mechanism as implemented within Firefox to be the most efficient patching mechanism of the Web browsers studied," the researchers wrote.

Security-research firm Sophos came to similar conclusions with its Endpoint Assessment Test. The free online scanning service checks for security vulnerabilities. It looks for missing Microsoft security patches, disabled client firewalls, or missing security-software updates.

After five weeks, Sophos compiled the findings, and the results showed that a whopping 81 percent of the corporate endpoints tested had failed one or more of these basic checks.

"Sadly, the Web is becoming more dangerous," said Carole Theriault, a senior security associate at Sophos. In fact, Sophos finds an infected Web page every five seconds. And almost 80 percent of these are legitimate sites.

"Sites become infected due to lax security, either due to poor maintenance or lack of understanding of the threat," Theriault said. "And this does not just affect small mom and pop sites."

Last week Sophos warned about a tennis-related Web site infected with malware, and on Wednesday it warned about Sony PlayStation Web pages.

Web surfers are a major target for attackers. If you use a poorly protected computer and land on a site with malicious code, you seriously

increase your chances of getting infected, Theriault said. "Basically, surfing the Web from a PC without the latest antivirus and security patches is about as safe as hanging out in the south pole in your birthday suit," she quipped.

Why is the problem so bad? Because hackers are actively looking to infect users and steal valuable information. Vendors are desperate to give customers a safe browsing experience and issue security patches regularly, but those only work if people download and install them, Theriault said.

Sophos recommends these safeguards:

Sign up for notifications from your browser vendor about new security patches and install them right away.

Consider turning off scripts so they don't run by default when a Web page loads.

Use up-to-date antivirus software and configure your firewall as tightly as you can without destroying the usability of your computer.

"Don't fall for unsolicited e-mails trying to lure you in with free stuff or great deals -- stick to well-reputed Web sites," Theriault said. "There is no silver bullet here, but these tips will certainly make you a much less attractive and vulnerable target."

Laptops Lost Like Hot Cakes at US Airports

Keep laptops close at airports, because they have a startling tendency to disappear in the blink of an eye, according to a new survey.

Some of the largest and medium-sized U.S. airports report close to 637,000 laptops lost each year, according to the Ponemon Institute survey released Monday. Laptops are most commonly lost at security checkpoints, according to the survey.

Close to 10,278 laptops are reported lost every week at 36 of the largest U.S. airports, and 65 percent of those laptops are not reclaimed, the survey said. Around 2,000 laptops are recorded lost at the medium-sized airports, and 69 percent are not reclaimed.

Travelers seem to lack confidence that they will recover lost laptops. About 77 percent of people surveyed said they had no hope of recovering a lost laptop at the airport, with 16 percent saying they wouldn't do anything if they lost their laptop during business travel. About 53 percent said that laptops contain confidential company information, with 65 percent taking no steps to protect the information.

Airports, along with hotels and parked cars. are places where laptops can be easily stolen, said the U.S. Federal Trade Commission on its Web site. The confusion of going through security checkpoints can make it easy for travelers to lose track of their laptops, making it "fertile ground for theft," the FTC said.

The FTC recommends people treat laptops "like cash." Like a wad of money, a laptop in public view - like the backseat of the car or at the

airport - could attract unwanted attention. The FTC also recommends using tracking devices like Absolute Software's LoJack, which can help track down a stolen laptop by reporting its location once it is connected to the Internet. Lenovo last week announced it would offer the LoJack option in its upcoming ThinkPad SL series laptops.

Attaching bells and whistles that sound off after detecting laptop motion could also minimize the chances of laptop theft, the FTC says.

Laptop theft is fairly prevalent in the U.S., said Mike Spinney, a spokesman for Ponemon Institute. In a study conducted by the institute, 76 percent of companies surveyed reported losing one or more laptops each year, of which 22 percent were due to theft or other criminal mischief.

Many people are ashamed of reporting lost laptops as they leave them where they shouldn't be, Spinney said.

The Ponemon survey was commissioned by Dell, which on Monday announced new security services to commercial customers that include tracking and recovery of lost laptops and prevention of data theft.

Dell's laptop tracking service uses technology including GPS (Global Positioning System) to locate and recover lost laptops. The data protection services include the ability to remotely delete data on a hard drive and services to recover data from failed hard drives.

Frugal Can Shop Internet for Software Freebies

Tech junkies looking to pinch pennies in today's economy can scour the Web for a bounty of free software - for word-processing and photo-editing, online storage and more.

Dozens of downloadable or online-only applications are available at no charge. While many are scaled-down versions of paid programs, you'd be surprised at how feature-rich these freebies can be.

The catch? Some of these applications may be ad-supported and won't offer extensive tech support, if any.

Companies that offer free software are motivated by a range of factors - from building brand recognition to up-selling users to a paid version, says Michael Gartenberg, research director at JupiterResearch. Some tech companies use free products to experiment with different revenue models, Gartenberg says. Google, (GOOG) for instance, embeds advertising in its Gmail e-mail offering.

"Google, in fact, is a good example of a company that can afford to develop a product today and figure out how to monetize it tomorrow," he says.

Here are a few of our favorite free apps.

Photo-editing software

Chances are you already know about Google's Picasa (picasa.google.com), a free downloadable program ideal for novice users that lets you manage,

edit and share your digital photo collection, but there are other free photo programs worth noting.

Adobe (ADBE) has launched Photoshop Express (Facebook). The Web is a great opportunity for Adobe to bring its digital imaging expertise "to very large, new audiences," says Geoff Baum, director of Photoshop Express at Adobe. The free tool is not intended to replace Adobe's beefier photo-editing packages sold at retail, such as Photoshop Elements or Photoshop CS3, Baum says.

Advanced users seeking free software might consider GIMP (gimp.org), available for Windows, (MSFT) Mac, (AAPL) Linux and other systems. With its customizable interface and powerful editing options, GIMP is ideal for both simple editing tasks, such as retouching, cropping, resizing and conversion, or more sophisticated tasks, including heavy image manipulation and effects.

Word processing, spreadsheets

The online-only Google Docs & Spreadsheets (OpenOffice.org 2 (openoffice.org)) are both free options for word processing and spreadsheet creation.

With Google's offering, users begin a new file or import an existing one. It supports popular Microsoft and Open Office file formats for documents (.doc and .odt) and spreadsheets (.xls and .ods). You can even create or import presentations (think PowerPoint) and collaborate with others online in real time. While generally you need to be online to use Google Docs & Spreadsheets, users of Google Gears (gears.google.com) can save documents (but not spreadsheets) to a hard drive to work offline, or sync files with a compatible cellphone (such as a BlackBerry).

Sun Microsystems' OpenOffice.org 2, which also runs on multiple operating systems, is an "open software" download that offers some of the functionality found in Microsoft Office, including word processing, spreadsheets, presentations, databases, graphics and much more.

File transfer, online storage

Even if your Internet service provider lets you e-mail a file up to 10 megabytes in size (enough for a few photos), doing so might strain your recipient's inbox. Instead, consider free file-transfer services such as YouSendIt (yousendit.com) or Sendspace.com (sendspace.com), which allow you to send files up to 100MB or 300MB in size, respectively. To use either, visit the website, type in someone's e-mail address and attach files from your computer; the recipient then receives an e-mail with a link to download the large files.

Need more space? Windows users can take advantage of Microsoft's Windows Live SkyDrive (skydrive.live.com), which offers up to 5 GB of free online storage (ideal to protect photos or documents from theft, fire or other disaster by storing it offsite). This password-protected service is easy to use, and you can access files from any Net-linked computer. Other free file-sending or online storage services include FileSend (filesend.net), LargeFilesASAP.com (largefilesasap.com) and MozyHome (mozy.com).

Anti-virus, anti-spyware

Just as you wouldn't leave your home unlocked, your PC shouldn't be

running without both anti-virus and anti-spyware tools to protect against malicious software.

Good choices include AVG Technologies' AVG Anti-Virus Free Edition (free.grisoft.com) for Windows XP and Windows Vista owners. More than 70 million people currently use the product, says Rick Carlson, AVG Technologies' managing director for North America, who says the free software helped to secure a foothold in the competitive anti-virus market dominated by Symantec and McAfee.

Already have an antivirus program you like? You can pick up free spyware detection tools including Microsoft's Windows Defender (windowsdefender.com) or Lavasoft's Ad-Aware 2008 Free (lavasoft.com). On the flip side, if you love your existing anti-spyware solution but need a free anti-virus program, consider Avira's AntiVir Personal (avira.com) and Alwil Software's Avast anti-virus Home Edition (avast.com).

Texas PC Repair Now Requires PI License

From its Texas Rangers to its enthusiastic take on the death penalty, the Lone Star State has long been known for its aggressive stance on law enforcement. Thanks to a strange new law, it's a sting that may soon be felt by a number of the state's computer-repair people.

A recently passed law requires that Texas computer-repair technicians have a private-investigator license, according to a story posted by a Dallas-Fort Worth CW affiliate.

In order to obtain said license, technicians must receive a criminal justice degree or participate in a three-year apprenticeship. Those shops that refuse to participate will be forced to shut down. Violators of the new law can be hit with a \$4,000 dollar fine and up to a year in jail, penalties that apply to customers who seek out their services.

Some of the area's larger companies already employ technicians with PI licenses, a fact which generally doesn't apply to small computer repair shops.

Political Baby-Kissing Goes 'Virtual'

The tradition of politicians kissing babies along the campaign trail has gone virtual, with a new website that jokingly urges parents to mail their babies to White House hopeful Barack Obama for a smooch.

"Barack travels a lot, but many babies live in places he hasn't been. That's why he's now accepting babies by mail," says the website sendbarackyourbaby.com, created by a history student in California.

"Send him your baby, and he'll kiss it and send it back to you ... in about 14 business days."

The site, which received 29,000 hits in its first two weeks, offers three options: "When your baby arrives, Barack will give it your choice of a kiss, a hug, or hope."

Site creator Kareem Shaya, of the northern California town of Mountain View, described the venture as just for fun, even though he does list the presumptive Democratic nominee's actual campaign address on the website.

"The point is not to make a political statement, it's just a silly joke," he said, adding that "hopefully" no real babies have been mailed.

Shaya admits he briefly considered doing a similar version for Republican John McCain, 71, who hopes to beat Obama for the presidency in the November election.

"I don't know," he said. "It seemed less plausible with John McCain."

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